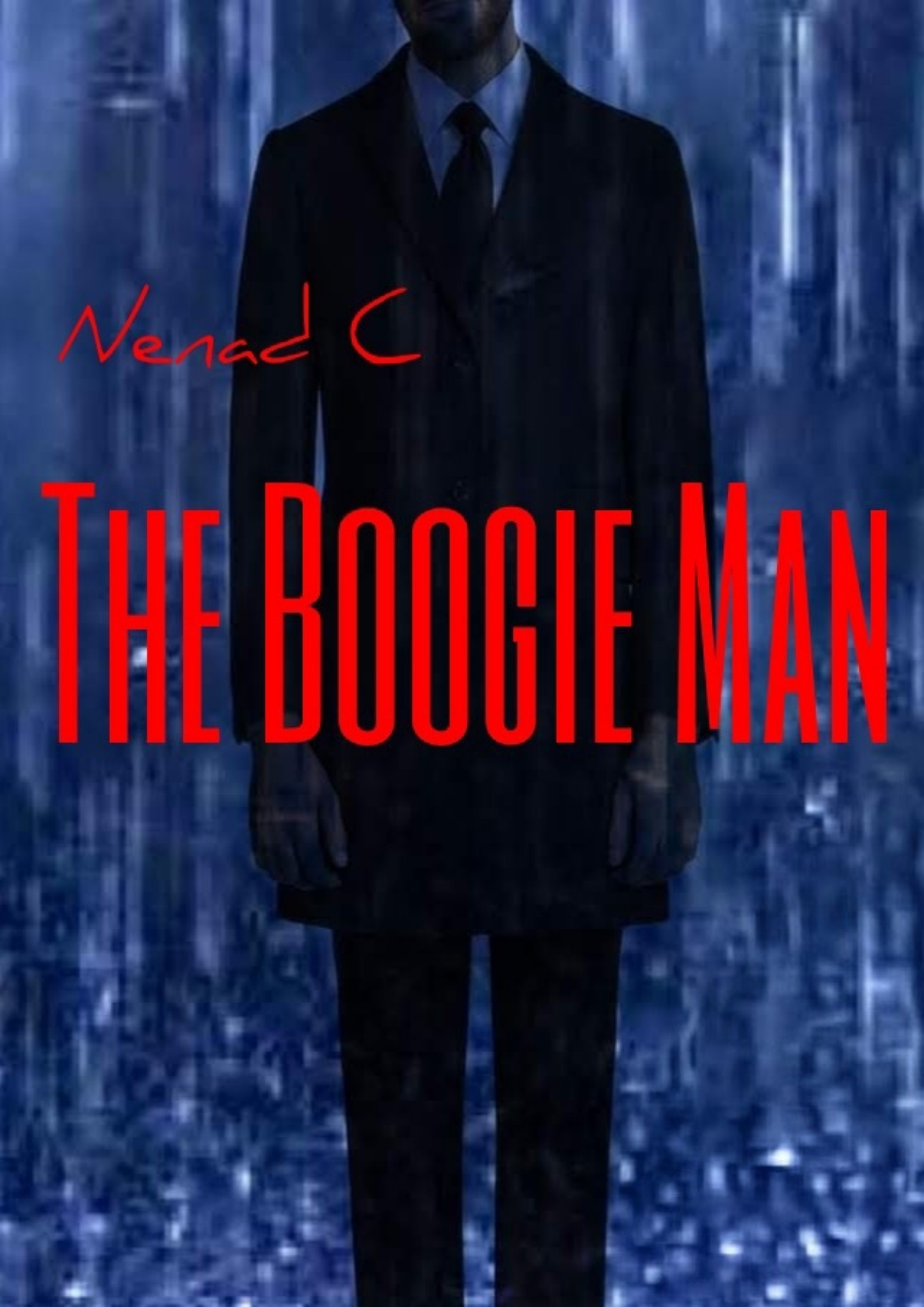
Nenad C
THE BOOGIE MAN

THE BOOGIE MAN

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THE BOOGIE MAN

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THE OVERTURE PARTY

Would you like to dance?
Swinging from the branch like a dying leaf on a breeze?
So…

I’m thirty-three years old.
That’s the age when messiahs die. Not when you hang out at parties.
Especially not ones like this.
I’ve seen online that they used to throw regular parties in places like this. They thought they were starting a revolution, but they were just a bunch of high kids nodding their heads and jumping in place until their bodies burned through the xtc or speed or whatever. Then they’d pop some more and keep going. They’d find an abandoned hangar like this, cram whatever sound system they could inside, and let a DJ spin the same mechanical, mindless rhythms over and over.
Except this right here isn't a DJ on a makeshift stage; it’s a full band.

At least ten of them on stage.
More.
And full lighting – green lasers tracing strange patterns through the air. A curtain of artificial smoke.
Disco balls shimmer from the ceiling. They reflect colored light beams off the blackened metal walls and the massive, lattice-like steel pillars that hold this whole construction together, crisscrossing into an intricate web from floor to ceiling.
I don’t even know what I’m doing here.
I don’t like parties.
I didn't like them even when I was as a kid. I’d cram myself into a corner and shove enough alcohol into my system to kill the anxiety. But not enough to kill myself.
I mean, what’s the point anyway?
An introductory mating ritual?
When they sway their hips and toss their hair, is it because they are enjoying the music?
Yeah, right.
It's like when a girl wears something with a neckline down to her belly button and then tells me: "My eyes are up here." Ha, like, fuck you. Why’d you put the tits out if you don't want me to look at them? As if I had a six-pack and walked down the street with my shirt unbuttoned – you’d be looking me in the eye?
It’s the same thing.
I’m standing alone on this shitty platform bolted to the metal wall of the hangar, with stairs leading up and down to the floor and the roof, lining all the walls. I’m not moving, just staring at this crowd that is, I guess, celebrating something down on the dance floor, on all the stairs, on all the platforms, except this one where I’m alone.

Besides having no clue what I'm doing here, there are a few other things I'd like to clear up with myself: First, why do I recognize a good portion of these people?
Those slant-eyed ones with shaved heads and eyebrows, in shapeless gray suits with collarless shirts and giant umbrellas in their hands?
Those hooded kids who won't stop staring at their phones?
Dimitriy and his high street crew sitting on threadbare couches and armchairs – picked up from God knows where – arranged on faded rugs on that platform to the left of the stage, on the opposite end from me?
Second, when and where did I get rained on (okay, not much, but enough for my hair and the shoulders of my blazer to be wet)?
Third, why is my tie tied so stupidly directly around my neck under an unbuttoned collar?
And, most importantly, fourth: why is the band singing a song dedicated to me?
"Hey, Mr. Boogie Man,
Let us celebrate what you did today..."
I mean, it's about me. Definitely. I'm the only Boogie Man I know, and I have no idea what I did, or what any of this is.
"You're a hero, a new Messiah,
You saved us from the night,"
The only thing clear to me is that they've aimed all the spotlights at me, and everyone has turned toward me, and everyone is toasting me.
"Good evening, Mr. Boogie Man,
We're waiting just for you..." wailed the singer, who is also the keyboard player. One of the two. I guess. Doesn't matter. He took off his green-and-pink horizontally striped top hat and bowed toward me.

“You gave us light,
Sacrificed the life you had,
For a better world to be…”
At those words, Dimitriy stood up from his blue, plush, tattered couch with wooden armrests. “Hey, Boogie Man, my man!” he shouted across the entire hangar and waved. And how the hell can I even hear him from that distance with all that loud music and the hum of the crowd? It makes no sense.

Fine, at least they synchronized their step quickly.
When they started, I thought my kidneys were going to fall out. Now, I just have to hold onto the crown that keeps sliding sideways over my eye and ear.
It’s not even a real crown.
A bunch of intertwined electrical wires with stripped tips sticking out like thorns. All I know is that someone put it on my head while I was sitting down in this armchair.
I mean, if you're already catching a free ride, you might as well just lean into it and have a laugh at yourself.
They’re carrying me.
Literally.
I’m sitting in some old, beat-up armchair (I guarantee Dimitriy “sourced” it from in front of some building entrance) with wooden curtain rods tied to the armrests with thick rope and duct tape, and those rods are resting on the shoulders of four guys – two on each side – carrying me through the crowd in the hangar like I’m a pharaoh from some old movie. And the band won't stop blaring. And the people are singing with them.
“Hey, Mr. Boogie Man! You saved us...”

The office was huge, split by panels into countless raws of cubicles.

The only thing I see is Darla. Up there on the stage. In a white ball gown that left her shoulders and back completely bare, with these long satin gloves reaching way past her elbows, a tiara her chestnut thick hair, and bright blue sash running from her left shoulder to her right hip and across her chest, like she'd just been crowned Miss Universe, highlighting her perfectly slender figure and perfect olive skin. She's waving back at the people who are cheering for her, blowing them kisses. When she smiles and reveals two perfect rows of white teeth behind those perfect lips, her eyes completely disappear behind unnaturally long, curled lashes.
Fuck, she's beautiful.

Pale LED bulbs emitted a cold light from the ceiling, making the entire room look sterile, inhuman. Like an operating theatre.

They're lowering me right in front of the stairs leading to the stage. They stand to the side to protect me from the people reaching out to touch me, to shake my hand... There are even those who desperately want to pull me in for a selfie with me.
Fuck all that, man, Darla is up there.
I trip over cables.
Twice.
I knock a cymbal over the drum.
Darla laughs. She reaches out and wraps her arms around my neck. Kisses me on the cheek.

He sat in his cubicle and stared at the unopened envelope lying next to his keyboard. He didn't have to open it to know what was written inside...

A kaleidoscope, brother.
That’s what it all looks like.
A giant kaleidoscope with Darla and me at the center.
She’s holding my arm, her other hand on my shoulder, her head leaning over.
I know she’s smiling. I wave to the people singing my name, clapping and jumping, and the band won't stop thundering and...

...You’re a worthless piece of shit.

WORTHLESS PIECE OF SHIT

The office was huge, split by panels into countless raws of cubicles. Pale LED bulbs emitted a cold light from the ceiling, making the entire room look sterile, inhuman. Like an operating theatre. He sat in his cubicle and stared at the unopened envelope lying next to his keyboard. He didn't have to open it to know what was written inside...
You’re a worthless piece of shit.
The hum never stops.
The monotonous drone of cooling fans fills the gaps between the sounds of typing, the clinking of teaspoons in cups of tea or coffee, and unintelligible phone conversations.
He wasn't the first to find such an envelope waiting on his desk. And he certainly wasn't the last. That’s why he just stared at it, without any desire to open it. He knew what was inside. A final check and a termination notice. He was fired. Just another in a long line of those replaced at work by AI. Everywhere. All administrative jobs were being extinguished one by one. He hadn't expected anything else

to happen to him. Besides, he didn't even care about the job. In fact, he didn't care about any job. Actually, he didn't care about anything…

His former bosses have bosses who would occasionally see the personal assistants of their bosses. And only when they scheduled them. Having a personal assistant means you're high up. Very high.

And above them are their bosses.

Above whom are the personal assistants of their bosses who have several personal assistants of their own, because the number of personal assistants grows as you go up.

And above them are directors, real directors whose personal assistants have their own boss.

And above them is the board of directors.

And above them, the owners.

And above the owners, there is surely someone else. He didn't know who. He couldn't even imagine.

Probably someone who gave the owner the money to become the owner.

A financier.

And above him are the banks.

Various banks, which gave him the money to give to the owner to become the owner, whose owners are other banks and other financiers.

He isn't even an algorithm in all of that. Just a few bits. A few zeros without a single one… That’s why he was easy to replace.

It’ll be much harder with the bosses and assistants.

He had thought about all of this once.

In his head, all that stuff with technology would make sense if, for example, it allowed you to work less for the same pay, since that technology already allows you to do the job faster. Or, if you’re into that, to work the same but

earn more, because you can do more. Instead, the ones at the bottom got fired because fewer people could do the same job, so those who stayed worked the same hours for the same money, but they just finish more work, while those at the top pocketed the surplus money left over from those who were fired. And the higher they were, the more they'd pocket proportionally. Million-dollar bonuses and whatever.

And even that made sense.

The only thing that didn't make sense was who would, in the end, buy all those goods or pay for all those services once everyone got fired.

It's Friday.

He could have left the very moment he saw the envelope on his desk.

But what would he do if he left early? Go home and stare at the concrete yard and the empty suburban street through the window of his late parents' house where he lives? He had paved the yard with concrete when he realized how much he hated mowing the grass and clearing the leaves that took months to fall. One day he just called a service that came and cut down both trees in front of the house and paved over the lawn and the former flower bed his mother used to tend.

At least his father would have liked it better this way.

You do it once, and it lasts forever.

His father wasn't cheap; he just believed things were eternal. You buy something once, and it's eternal for a lifetime. That was what cost him that very life – both his father and his mother. Nothing is eternal. Not things, not life.

The first thing he did with his first paycheck was buy a new 64-inch OLED smart TV and throw out his father's

old television. For days, he flipped through channels and spent every moment in the house in front of the new TV, watching nothing, because there was nothing to see anyway.
Later, he stopped doing even that.
He would simply come back from work, eat, and go to sleep.
On weekends, he wouldn't even get out of bed. Food delivery.
Then Monday would come.
And work.
He had been wearing the same two suits for years. The same shirts. The same ties he inherited from his late father. The same shoes. The same belt… He had long since stopped expecting anything. Even this envelope standing unopened next to his keyboard. He had expected it earlier. Much earlier. Long ago.
Sometimes he wondered if anyone would even notice if he didn't show up for work. He could open an email on Friday as if he were going to write a reply and simply not show up on Monday. The system would register that he was already working on something and would send the next incoming email to the next available person, while his computer would always show as busy.
The only reason he never did it was that he wouldn't even know what to do if he didn't come to work.
He waited for the elevator with the others from his floor and went down to the lobby.
It was getting dark.
The day-long, endless gray of the sky is just taking on a darker hue.

The rain won't stop. It’s not a heavy rain. With this kind of rain, it seems stupid to open an umbrella, but then, ten minutes later, you’re soaked.

He stopped under the covered, glassed-in entrance of the glass office building, surrounded by other identical, yet slightly different glass office buildings stretching into the sky.

Rain flows down the glass and drips onto the street, onto the sidewalk. Occasionally, someone of those crowding out of the building would brush his shoulder. He didn't pay attention. He stared at the Starbucks window across the street. She should be there; she should have arrived by now. Drops on the glass refracted the light, distorting the faces of the people sitting inside.

Darla.

She was there every Friday.

He didn't remember when he first saw her. All he knew was that it was a Friday. He was hungry and stopped in to get a sandwich and coffee, and she was sitting at a table by the window. He sat a few tables away from her and waited until she left. The following week, he came every day, and she appeared again on Friday. He repeated the experiment for another week, and she appeared on Friday again.

That’s how he knew he saw Darla for the first time on a Friday.

Usually, he would sit a bit away from her so he could see her while pretending to look through the window.

Sometimes, if he was lucky, she would be waiting in line a few people ahead of or behind him. Then he could smell her perfume. That’s also how he found out her name. The idiot behind the counter asked her to repeat it three times so she could write her name on the plastic cup.

Darla was an escort.

That became clear to him quickly.

Everything on Darla was expensive. A simple mini dress to mid-thigh. A different color every time and different enough. Matching pumps. A simple necklace and two or three bracelets on one hand. An expensive watch on the other. A blazer casually draped over her shoulders. A long trench or coat on cold days. Simple, barely-there makeup. Her hair always brushed back and tied in a ponytail. All of that was meant to hide what she was, and someone who paid for all that would send a limousine in front of the Starbucks every Friday between five and six in the afternoon. Darla would get in and go somewhere.

The limo was already there. And then it was gone. Between the rain, the umbrellas, and the commotion, he didn't even manage to see her. It didn't matter. He was fired. He wouldn't even be here on any future Fridays.

He turned up his blazer lapels and headed down the street.

THIS IS IT

The first train is at six-fifteen; after that, it’s the express at quarter to seven, but it doesn't stop at this station, and the next one isn't until eight-thirty.
The streets are completely gridlocked.
Everything is at a standstill.
If he cuts through the mall, he’ll definitely make it on time – at least, that’s what he thought.
He barely managed to squeeze between people who stood still, standing on their tiptoes or stretching their necks to see what was happening up ahead.
He pushed through.
"Excuse me," he kept repeating as he shoved his way forward.
Occasionally, he’d step out into the street and try to slip between the trapped cars, but it was impossible; every few seconds, a driver would fling their door wide open and step out to swear, having already leaned on their horn for minutes on end.
He got back to the sidewalk and kept pushing.

"Excuse me. Just a second..."

A guy with a massive, open black umbrella turned abruptly. If he hadn't stepped back, the umbrella's ribs would've gouged his eyes out. "Sorry..." The guy sized him up from head to toe, then stepped aside. "Thanks," he said, slipping a step ahead. *The kind of freaks walking the streets these days*, he thought as he pushed further. To be fair, the man with the umbrella did look intimidating – smooth-shaven chin, head, and eyebrows, slanted eyes, high cheekbones, wearing a gray suit and a collarless shirt, at least six-foot-something...

He didn't think about him for long. The only thing that mattered was getting out of this crowd and catching the train.

"You can't cross the street now, sir. I mean, you could, but it wouldn't be smart," a cop at the intersection explained to him. "If you tried to cross now, for instance, it would look like you joined those people protesting the government and the president. At least, that's how it would look on all these intersection cameras and the drones. And then that would stay in your file forever, you understand? Not smart."

He looked up at the traffic light; a camera sat perched on top of it.

The lights changed in vain.

No one moved.

Everyone was waiting for the endless column of protesters to pass.

"Dimitriy don't give a fuck about cameras or files! Death to fascism and all that crap! Dimitriy is always where the shit is, and when there ain't enough shit, Dimitriy makes it himself!" A short, stocky black man shoved his way through and lunged into the crowd marching down the

street. He was wearing five or six layers of clothes, with round metal glasses – one lens yellow, the other pink. The long dreadlocks on his head were dyed every color of the rainbow. Each dread individually. Only his five-day-old beard was completely white. He ran among the protesters and started jumping, waving, and sticking his tongue out at the cameras. Soon, several similar individuals joined him from somewhere, and they all vanished into the mass.
He watched them go, then glanced around as if waiting for someone to tell him what to do.
The people stood motionless.
The cars stood motionless.
Between them and the protesters stood a motionless police cordons on both sides of the street.
On the other side of the road, by the trapped cars, stood a group of kids. They couldn't have been older than twenty. They hid from the rain under their hoodies. Heads down, they stared at their phones, fingers flying across the screens. *Like some kind of cult*, he thought. He decided to stay and wait. What else could he do?

He was running.
At least half an hour had passed, surely more, before the last of the protesters vanished from sight and traffic was released.
At first, he just picked up his pace, but now he was sprinting.
He knew he was late, but he ran regardless.
It really doesn't matter, he told himself, yet he kept running. Somehow, it felt like he had to succeed at least at one thing today.
Anything.
Even if it was just making it to that train home.

I'm already late, he thought, *but maybe the train is late too.* Maybe the train was held up somewhere. Maybe those who blocked the streets had blocked the tracks too, and he'd make it.

He could already see the metal stairs leading to the elevated platform where the station was. He took them two or three at a time.

He was on the landing when he realized that down in the corner by the first step, an old woman was sitting on a wooden stool with a wicker basket in her lap, full of small bouquets of dried flowers. It struck him as odd that her image was so clear in his mind, given that he'd barely looked at her. She wore a knee-length, drab-gray raincoat, a large black woolen shawl with tassels and small red flowers draped over her shoulders, thick nude-colored tights, and brown flat shoes with thick soles and a metal buckle on the side. She had a sort of old-fashioned gray hat on her head. A wicker basket full of dried flower bouquets was slung over her left arm, resting in her lap, and in her outstretched right hand, she held one such bouquet, as if offering it for sale to non-existent passersby.

The platform was empty.

The entire platform was deserted.

Massive, lattice-like metal pillars held the entire structure of the metal canopy together, crisscrossing into an intricate web from floor to the ceiling , but there was no one on the platform for the canopy to protect from the rain. Here and there, runoff water formed occasional puddles on the asphalt. He sat on one of the many empty benches, positioned right next to one of the pillars.

He leaned his elbows on his knees and rested his head on his clenched fists.

He watched the concentric circles that the raindrops falling from the canopy made in the puddles. The tiny waves expanded and collided, canceling each other out where they met.

It really doesn't matter, he thought.

He tied one end of his tie directly around his neck. The other end to the lattice of the pillar. High up. He stood on the bench. One step into the void was all it would take. He extended his right leg forward…

"So, you’re sick and tired sick of wasting your life, eh?"

She’s standing there at the top of the metal stairs. The wicker basket full of dried flower bouquets over her left arm. The black woolen shawl over her shoulders. The long, drab-gray raincoat, the thick nude tights, the brown flat shoes with thick soles and a metal buckle on the side. The ridiculous gray hat.

"Well... C’mon in," she nods toward the stairs.

I can go down, but it doesn't look right. If colors had a scent, this would smell like rotting meat.

WHAT IS GOING ON (Part One)

The ball is heavy and big.
It’s really big. The ball is orange like an orange, and heavy, and just really big. I can't wrap my arms around it. I try.
Or maybe the ball isn't big; maybe my hands are small. And it’s heavy. I mustn't drop it.
Dad bought it.
Dad buys things to last.
That’s good. It’s good when things last. When you buy something, it should last. For a lifetime. I don't know how long that is.
I know I mustn't drop the ball.
Not ever.
If I drop it, it might get scratched or something. Or maybe not. I don't know. When I drop something, Dad gets angry.
No, that’s not right.
Dad never gets angry.
He just goes silent. That’s worse.

Yelling is better. When someone yells, it’s a scolding. When someone goes silent, it’s a punishment.
I can't hold it.
It’s slipping.
My hands are small.
It’s falling.
It falls.
Hits the concrete.
Rolls away.
Dad watches and says nothing.
Dad is silent.
What is going on?

Winston “Wince” McCarthy isn't strong. He isn't tall. He isn't smart. He’s just tall enough and strong enough and smart enough to know how to hurt me without consequences.
He comes with three friends. Always three. Never alone. Never two. Three make an audience.
Every day after school.
Every fucking day.
Stupid Winston and his little army.
I don't understand the pleasure they get. I don't understand why it’s me. There are kids more stupid than me. More ugly. More fat. More poor. But they pick me. Maybe because I’m the quietest. Maybe because I don't fight back.
Boogie Man. Boogie Man. Boogie Man. Boo-gie-Man…
I know the rules.
They aren't allowed to actually hurt me. That would mean expulsion. Maybe even a lawsuit.
A little shoving – that’s allowed. A few flicks to the head – that’s tradition. Mockery – that’s freedom of speech.

Knocking a bag to the ground so the notebooks spill out like water – that’s an accident.
Everything they do is within the limits of what’s permitted.
It’s just humiliating.
Boogie Man. Boogie Man. Boogie Man. Boo-gie-Man…
I feel like the whole world is watching. Like everyone passing by sees me standing there, bowing my head, staying silent while they say things I don't listen to because I don't have to. The words are always the same. The insults repeat because creativity requires effort.
I know what they want.
They want me to stand up to them.
To say something. To try to hit them. Anything that would give them an excuse. “He started it.” That’s all they need. Three words, and then they're allowed to do anything.
That’s why I just bow my head.
Every day.
Ten minutes of humiliation.
Ten minutes of waiting for it to stop.
It doesn't stop.
It never stops.
It just changes shape. It gets new faces. New names. But it’s always the same.
I’m always alone, and there are always more of them.
Winston pushes me.
I fall backward.
My bag falls.
The notebooks spill out.
They laugh.
I pick up the papers from the sidewalk.
What is going on?

Her name is Sara. Or Sandra. Or something with an S. Maybe not an S. I don't know.
She’s the most beautiful girl in high school.
That’s not subjective. It’s a fact. Everyone agrees. Even the girls agree. She is exceptional. In everything. In sports. In studying. In the way she walks as if the ground isn't good enough for her shoes.
I ask her out.
I don't know why.
Maybe because that’s what people do. Maybe because I think I have to try. Maybe because I actually think there’s a chance.
“Do you really think I’d ever go out with you?”
She’s not mocking me. She’s not laughing at me. She’s just looking at me. Genuinely puzzled that such a thing could even cross my mind. I guess that’s why it hurts even more. I was prepared for her to reject me. Even to shout so everyone could hear how stupid I was for asking her out. Me, invisible and irrelevant.
"Do you really think I’d ever go out with you?"
A whisper.
A quiet, confused whisper.
I was ready for anything except that puzzled whisper of hers – her total bafflement at an idea she simply wasn't prepared for, and never would be: that someone like me honestly thought he had a right to her. As if I’d asked her if she wanted to eat glass. As if I’d asked her if she wanted to jump off a roof. The question isn't offensive. The question is nonsensical.
"Do you really think I’d ever go out with you?"
I don't answer.
What should I say?
“Yes, I do”?

Stupid.
“No, just kidding”?
Even stupider.
I just turn and walk away.
It hurts more than it’s allowed to hurt. It hurts because I’m not even important enough to deserve a rejection. I’m just confusion. An awkwardness. A glitch in her day.
Her, being like that.
Me, being like this.
Maybe I just want to confirm what I already know.
What is going on?

A policeman is at the door.
The uniform is dark. The facial expression is official.
The car throws blue, then red light into the dark. Blue. Red. Blue. Red. The hypnotic rhythm of an accident.
Another officer stands by the car. Maybe a woman. I can't see clearly. Maybe I don't want to.
“I’m sorry to have to tell you this.”
The introduction.
They always start with an introduction.
“Your parents have been killed.”
A pause.
He expects a reaction. I don't have one.
“An accident. Traffic.”
Of course.
All accidents are traffic-related.
Everything else is tragedy or illness. Long and difficult, or short and sudden. Everything else isn't an accident.
“My sincere condolences.”
It’s not sincere. It’s an obligation. Part of the training. “Say this with empathy.” He says it with empathy. He’s doing his job.

I’m silent.
I don't know what to say.
“Thank you”? That would be weird. “Okay”? That would be sick.
I just stand there.
“Are you alright?”
A question with no answer.
Am I alright? What does it mean to be alright when a cop tells you your parents are dead? Is there a standard protocol for “alright” in this situation?
“Yes, thank you. I am.”
A lie.
I’m not alright.
But I’m not any different than usual, either.
Just another ugly event in a series of ugly events.
My father always bought things to last. He wasn't cheap. He just thought you buy things once, and then they last forever. The old brakes on his old Toyota clearly didn't fit his vision of longevity when he slammed under a truck.
Together with my mother.
I close the door.
The policeman says something else, but the door blocks the sound. Blue light. Red light. Blue. Red.
I sit on the couch.
The same couch my father sat on when he watched TV. The same coffee stain on the left side. The same pillow that was never quite comfortable but didn't need to be replaced because it could still serve its purpose.
Now I am truly alone.
Not philosophically alone.
Not metaphorically alone.
Literally alone.
I wonder if I should cry.

I don't cry.
Not because I’m not sad. I don't cry because I don't know how. Or I’ve forgotten. Or I never learned how it’s done.
I just sit.
The couch smells old. Like dust. Like a life that passed and left traces that no one cleans.
I’m twenty-three years old. Or twenty-four. It doesn't matter.
What matters is that I’m alone.
And that’s new.
And that’s old.
And that’s everything.
What is going on?

THE INEQUALITY ANTHEM

The walls are white.
White isn't emptiness. White is the absence of what you want in your life. If you want anything at all.
There is no furniture in the room. A room without furniture has no identity. A room without identity is a room where you are anyone. Or no one. Especially no one.
One old wooden desk and two battered wooden chairs. A light bulb without a shade hangs by a wire from the ceiling.
I sit on that wooden chair and think: this chair is older than my father. This chair has survived more asses than I will ever meet people. The floorboards have blackened from the years, from shoes, from the grime that crawled through the cracks while the world outside grew steadily worse.
Two windows. No curtains. Just glass between me and the world I’ve learned not to look at.
The slant-eyed man sits across from me.

The one without hair, beard, or eyebrows. The one with the umbrella. The same one who almost hit me during the protests. He didn't, but he could have. That’s important. People don't hit you just because they can. People don't hit you because there’s a reason. Or because there’s a plan. Or because they need you for something. Most often, they don't even know they’ve hit you.

I wonder what his reason is.

I don't ask out loud. I haven't asked anything out loud for years. Maybe five. Or ten. Or forever. Time isn't the same when nothing you do is fun. Eight hours. Nine if they say so. Ten if the boss stays. Eleven if you want to get promoted.

Promotion is a myth they sell you so you’ll stay in your place.

The slant-eyed man leans his elbows on the desk. An old desk with drawers on the left and a small cabinet on the right. A rotary phone. The handset cord coils like an olive-green snake.

"Feeling like nobody?"

I’m silent.

"Just struggling from day to day?"

I’m silent.

"You don’t have any control, and your life is all work and no play?"

Everything he says is true. It annoys me. It doesn't annoy me because he’s right. It annoys me because he *knows* he’s right. It annoys me that I don't have to answer because the answer hangs in the air like that lightbulb without a shade from the ceiling.

The slant-eyed man raises his hand.

And the white wall is no longer a wall.

Biology tells you a wall isn't alive. Physics tells you a wall is solid. Society tells you a wall is protection. A mask that hides what lies behind it.

The wall becomes a visual display unit. A massive one.

Charts pop up as if vomited from the gut of some financial monster – pie charts, curves, numbers going up, numbers going down, numbers that want to replace who and what you are.

"If money is the only measure of our lives," says the slant-eyed man, waving his hands as if conducting a philharmonic orchestra of capitalism, "if what you earn is what you are, well then we should kill it right now on the fly."

A pause.

"Capitalism must die!"

I feel his breath on the back of my neck. I didn't see him get up. I didn't hear him approach. But his hands are on my shoulders, pressing just hard enough for me to feel the pressure, but not the pain. That’s a skill. People who know exactly how hard to press are usually dangerous. Or trained. Or both.

I look at the charts.

My life isn't on those charts. My life is below the line. Below the X-axis. Below anything anyone would be interested in looking at. I am not a number that has meaning. I am a rounding to N decimal places. A statistical error.

The display that was once a wall becomes a TV screen.

The shots shift like a nightmare – smoke from factories, black, thick, a pulsing poison; car exhausts, a million exhausts, a billion, each breathing death into the air we breathe to live because we have no choice; oil spilled in the sea, black as the Earth’s blood, dead fish floating on

the surface as proof that we've fucked everything up; clear-cut forests, stumps like tombstones; floods that won't stop, water that doesn't ask where we live.
They turn my chair.
The slant-eyed man turned the chair.
Always passive. It always happens to you, never the other way around.
"You worry about pollution and you get short of breath, while they make a profit by pushing Mother Planet to death."
A whisper.
Directly into my ear.
A whisper is more intimate than a scream. A whisper tells you that you're the only one being addressed. A whisper tells you that you're special. A whisper is more frightening than a shout.
The slant-eyed man stands in front of me.
He gets into my face.
His face is so close to mine that I can see the pores in his skin, I could count his eyelashes if I wanted to.
"We need cooperation instead of competition."
His breath ends up in my nose.
"We need collectivism instead of selfish individualism."
His eyes are fixed on mine.
"A fair share, not owner's equity."
His head – no hair, no beard, no eyebrows – occupies my entire field of vision.
"And, above all, what we truly need is equality!"
I'm silent because I don't know what to say. I'm silent because I don't know if I came here because I wanted to. I don't even know how I got here. I'm silent because I don't know where "here" is, or why "here" matters. But I'm also silent because I feel something.

It confuses me.
I haven't felt anything for years. I don't know how many. The feeling is like a leg that’s been asleep and is just waking up – unpleasant, prickly, like proof that you’re alive. I wasn't sure if I was alive. I wasn't even sure if I wanted to be alive.
But the feeling is there.
And I like it.
Not the feeling. I like that I’m feeling *something*. Anything. Even discomfort. Even fear.
Fear is the best proof that you care.
The slant-eyed man straightens up and all the walls – all the fucking walls, the ceiling, the floor – everything becomes one giant screen. There is no exit. No neutral corner. Everything is everywhere.
He shouts.
Not at me.
At everyone.
"Gather everyone, from everywhere!"
People are on the screen. Men. Women. Children. Every shade of skin, shape of eyes, nose. Every faith. Every language. All in their office cubicles with sterile, inhuman, white LED light; all in sweatshops in the Far East sewing sneakers they can’t afford for 50 cents an hour; all in mines in Africa pulling ore for the phones we are wirelessly imprisoned by. Because rent doesn't pay itself, because food doesn't come from a magic table that sets itself. Because you need electricity to have the internet to buy what you produced.
"From the east, the west, the north, and the south!"

There are 0.01 percent of them. Or, maybe, 0.001 percent. Or, maybe, 0.0001 percent. They can build a hotel in

space if they want to. Buy a whole island if they want to. Kill anyone if they want to. There are few of them. Very few. It’s just that those few have a lot.
They have everything.
"Unite, because you know what this is about!"
He isn't looking at me. He’s looking at a camera that doesn't exist. He’s looking at everyone and no one.
"If we want to be free, then we must fight against the common enemy!"
On the screen, the first ones and the second ones are now side by side.
The contrast slaps you in the face.
"Listen to what I’m telling you!"
A pause.
"Just kill it on the fly. Capitalism must die!"

When there are no screens, the walls are white. Again.
I sit in the chair and my hands lie in my lap. He watches me. I don't know for how long. I don't know what he’s waiting for.
Capitalism must die.
A fine sentence. Short. Direct.
A sentence can also kill, but dead systems are never truly dead. Dead systems are zombies. They mutate. They return with a different name but the same face.
I wonder if the slant-eyed man knows that.
I don't even know if I care if he knows.
The feeling is still there.
Unpleasant.
And I like that.
"Capitalism must die," I repeat in my head. Testing how it sounds. When you repeat them enough times, words become a mantra. Every mantra is freedom of the mind.

And freedom of the mind is a problem.

THE WHOLE WORLD IS GHETTO

People don't live in cardboard boxes. *Cardboardians* live in cardboard boxes. Translucent. Drained. The entire street, as far as I can see. Cardboard and blankets full of holes like mini-tents, like nests built by bird-people who decided not to fly. Shelters made of planks and rags and a despair you can see with the naked eye. A relapse of homelessness.

The rain is tedious.

That’s the worst thing rain can be. Tedious rain falling because it has to fall. Because it’s in its job description.

I stroll between people dressed in everything they own. Layer upon layer upon layer. Like an onion. If you peel too much, you cry. If you don't peel, you don't know what’s underneath. Maybe no one. Maybe just another layer.

I carry everything I have on me because I have nowhere to leave it.

No, that’s a lie.

They have nowhere to leave it.

The difference between me and them is that I have nothing to leave.

They shamble. Half-paralyzed. Cheap drugs that do the job, but don't do it well. Drugs are like government-approved medicine – they stop the pain, but they don't solve the problem. The problem still rots beneath the skin.

I stop because they’re standing on the corner. Three of them. Or four. They look at me suspiciously. The streetlights barely illuminate their faces, but enough for me to see: I don't trust you. You don't trust me. No one trusts anyone, because trust costs more than any of us have.

"The whole world is a ghetto."

A voice right next to me.

I know that voice. I’ve heard it before.

That guy, Dimitriy.

"Turned inside out," he continues confidentially, as if revealing some great secret. "Flipped upside down and spins around and around."

A fucking circle that doesn't even know where it starts or where it ends, and that’s the point. The point is that there is no point. All that exists is the circle. A dog chasing its tail.

I don't turn my head. When you stop in this part of town, you're asking to be rolled. Dimitriy catches me lightly under the arm and pulls me to keep walking. These are his people. That’s why we have to walk together.

"Day after day you moan – pay all your bills and wait until kills life in you."

Bills…

It’s the fifth day of the month when the bills arrive: electricity bills, water bills, gas bills, heating bills, internet

bills, phone bills, cable bills – bills for a life you don't live.
"The whole world is a ghetto," he repeats, "and no one is getting out of here alive."
Dimitriy's people on the street. Cardboard boxes. Blankets. Holes in the blankets. Drugs in the veins. They didn't lose the game. They decided not to play. They decided to step out of the circle.
"The bankers must be proud of it."
Dimitriy lists them off like he's reading a grocery list.
"And the lawyers must be proud of it."
The list continues.
"And the brokers must be proud of it, and the dealers must be proud of it, and the racists must be proud of it, and the fascists must be proud of it..."
A pause.
"When you really think about it, this whole wide world is full of shit!"
He laughs. The laugh turns into a cough. The cough turns into a wheeze turns into a laugh.
"It's really funny," he says and reaches into his pocket.
I don't see what he's pulling out. I see what he pulled out: two dried mushrooms. Brown. Shriveled. They look like the desiccated brains of Lilliputians.
He offers them to me on his palm.
"Think you're safe in your sweet home?"
I don't know if he's asking or stating.
I take one. Put it in my mouth. The taste is bitter. Earthy. Like eating something that died a long time ago but hasn't decomposed enough.
"Eating a TV dinner alone," Dimitriy says and puts the second mushroom in his mouth.
Exactly. I'm eating a TV dinner alone.

"What a waste of life," he shakes his head. He pulls me by the sleeve, turns me face-to-face, and stops me in the middle of a deserted intersection.
"But when the Government knocks on your door..." Dimitriy says solemnly. The seriousness is at odds with the colorful braids on his head, his two-toned glasses, his obese wheezing.
"What you gonna do then?" someone shouts further away from us. They’re coming from all sides.
"Stand up with a gun in your hand?" another voice. Thin. Female.
"Or will you kneel on the floor?"
What?
I don't understand.
Why would the Government come to *my* door? The Government is busy with other doors. More important doors. Doors behind which people have something the Government wants. To say it protects me. That it cares for me.
"Raise your head for the new world."
A murmur.
Coming from everywhere.
"Raise your head for the new world."
From the cardboard boxes, from the blankets, from the air, from the earth, from my skull.
"Raise your head for the new world!"
Dimitriy hands me another mushroom. I don't think. I take it. Put it in my mouth. Chew. Swallow.
A lot of time passes, or not.
I don't know what "a lot" is.
The world melts.
Like wax. Like cheese in a microwave. Like a bubble gum in the sun on scorched asphalt.

I look at the homeless.
They shimmer as if neon flows beneath their skin. As if made of something that doesn't belong to this world. The homeless man in front of me isn't a homeless man. He’s something else. Someone else. Someone who refused to be part of the circle – where work is someone else's wealth, illness is a source of profit, knowledge is inaccessible – a doctor, a teacher, an architect... A firefighter putting out a fire that always reignites.
"The whole world is a ghetto," I hear Dimitriy’s voice.
It doesn't come from his mouth.
It comes from inside me.
From my lungs. From my stomach. From my skull, which is cracking like an egg.
"And no one will get out alive."
People multiply. They grow. They emerge from the air. Nurses in nursing homes. Taxi drivers with steering wheels in hands cramped from driving. Train engineers. Street sweepers cleaning streets that will be dirty again tomorrow.
"Remember the dream of the promised land."
Dimitriy’s voice says.
Or my voice.
Or the world’s voice.
"Remember the freedom that is in your hands."
What freedom?
I don't see freedom.
I only see hands. Hands that clean. Hands that heal. Hands that hold tools. Hands that are never empty, because empty hands don't earn a living.
"Remember a life worth dying for."
They change.
All of them.

All of a sudden.
"When freedom is slavery,"
"What is left for you and me?"
"Your random vote won't set you free."
"A useless cry for liberty."
"And when they finally come for you,"
"The only thing you can do is defend the last thing you care about."
"The whole world is a ghetto, man."
Their voices overlap and cancel each other out like waves caused by raindrops in a puddle at some train station. Like radio frequencies. Like a heart attack repeating a million times a second.
I feel stretched.
No.
I feel crucified.
Like a starfish. Arms spread. Legs spread. Body stretched like rubber.
I float.
Above the street.
Above the cardboard boxes.
Above Dimitriy, who is now one, but also a thousand at the same time.
Above the city that spreads beneath me like a living map. Buildings breathe. Cars crawl like insects. People are ants. No. People are cells. Cells of a massive organism that is sick. To death. It only hides it.
I see the planet beneath me.
Round. Dirty blue. Greasy. Covered in cities like a rash. A labyrinth with no exit. Only entrances. Infinite entrances to hallways leading to other hallways leading to dead ends.
"The whole world is a ghetto."

Dimitriy’s voice or my voice or the voice of a dying world.
I float and I watch and I’m crucified and I’m free and nothing means anything, but it means everything, and my brain is too small to take it all in, so it leaks through my ears.
The rain is tedious.
Every drop hits my face as I float:
Pay the bills.
Spin in circles.
Die slowly.
Don't be a noise.
"No one will get out alive," I repeat, and my voice is Dimitriy’s voice is the voice of everyone who ever worked a job they hate to survive a day they aren't sure they want.
The planet turns beneath me.
The labyrinth expands.
Cardboard boxes grow like mushrooms after the rain.
And I float.
Crucified.
A starfish without a sea.
"The whole world is a ghetto," I whisper, and the whisper becomes a scream becomes a prayer becomes silence.
And the rain falls.
Tedious.
Fucking tedious.

THE PAIN ITSELF

The phone vibrates.
It doesn't ring.
It just vibrates.
Hard.
I have the impression it’s grinding my ribs. That it’s stripping the meat from my bones.
In my palm, glowing pixels between thin layers of glass spell out only five words:
RITE OF THE CONTINUOUS FEED.
The hangar is a cathedral of rust.
Lattice steel beams crisscross all around me like the bones of some prehistoric monster that swallowed too much industrial waste.
Hidden behind pulled-up hoodies. Heads bowed. A generation that thinks it’s free because it holds a device in its hands that can contain the whole world. A generation that thinks it’s free because it thinks it can look however it wants, yet wears the same uniform of oversized hoodies, pants, the same sneakers, the same haircuts, makeup…

From the platform on the stairs along the metal wall, I can't see their faces.
Only the bluish glow of the screens. The glow that defines them.
Like some kind of cult.
Without the "like."
You are what your phone watches.
You are what you like.
You are your feed.
A dull hum like a deep vibration of the entire body that shifts my entrails.
They have filled the entire hangar. One right next to the other. Motionless. Only their fingers fly across the screens.
My phone vibrates again.
FEED IS LIFE!
LATENCY IS SIN!
Sentences flash on and off on the screen. Like warnings before a plane crash. A command or a survival guide.

Latin is a dead language.
It lives on in only three situations – in biology, medicine, and in placeholders.
Lorem ipsum dolor sit amet…
That’s how it goes. I know. I’ve seen it a million times. A collection of words you shouldn't think about. Empty words needed to fill a form.
Only, the hum says something else.
Dolorem ipsum.
It doesn't go like that.
It goes: *Lorem ipsum dolor…*
Dolorem ipsum. Dolorem ipsum. Dolorem ipsum. Dolorem ipsum. Dolorem ipsum. Dolorem ipsum.

Dolorem ipsum. Dolorem ipsum. Dolorem ipsum. Dolorem ipsum. Dolorem ipsum. Dolorem ipsum.
It doesn't go like that!!!
Dolorem ipsum. Dolorem ipsum. Dolorem ipsum. Dolorem ipsum. Dolorem ipsum. Dolorem ipsum. Dolorem ipsum. Dolorem ipsum. Dolorem ipsum. Dolorem ipsum. Dolorem ipsum….
Pain itself?
Ancient Latin classes. When I was ready for something else. Something more. Something better.
Pain itself.
Yes.
Dolorem ipsum. Pain itself.
Why, then, did someone hide the meaning and put it into someone else's mundane daily life?
The humming vibrates like a phone.
I feel it in my kidneys, in my liver, in my pancreas, in my gut…

"Welcome to the Multidisciplinary Institute of Whatever We Want."
A metallic voice bounces metallically off the metal walls.
I’m welcome?
Somewhere?
Me?
"Truth number one: There is no material reality. Everything you see, hear, feel… Is just information."
No one moves.
None of these devotees of a modern deity.
The phone vibrates in my hand.
Signal-to-Noise Ratio – 0!
It flickers on the screen.
A warning that I am nowhere.

"As has been proven, the only eternal existence in the universe doesn't belong to energy, but to information, because energy itself is just information."
The metallic voice continues monotonically. No emotion. Emotions, too, are just information. Joy. Fear. Anxiety… Just an informational sign in front of an event by which we determine our relationship to it. Positive or negative.
Signal-to-Noise Ratio – 0!
Signal: Useful information.
Noise: Useless information.
Ratio: Zero, no signal.
Only emptiness. Silence without meaning. A person without content.
A useless terminal. I am inputting nothing.
FEED IS LIFE!
My hand is numb from the phone's vibration.
"Not even a supermassive black hole can destroy it. Do you know why? Because a supermassive black hole itself is just information. A conglomerate of information!..."
Signal-to-Noise Ratio – 0!
Signal-to-Noise Ratio – 0!
LATENCY IS SIN!
"...Massive enough to create a completely new universe."
Nothing dies. A black hole is the recycling of the universe. On a cosmic level. A new universe from existing information.
"What you will now experience is truth number two: He who controls information, controls the universe!" The voice pauses as if wanting to emphasize the significance of what was said with silence.
Everything is connected… Everything that’s happening. Everything everyone is telling me. Everything is connected. Only I don't understand.

Signal-to-Noise Ratio – 0!
Signal-to-Noise Ratio – 0!
Signal-to-Noise Ratio – 0!
Signal-to-Noise Ratio – 0!
The vibration splits my knuckles. Tears my tendons.
My hand is not my hand.
My hand is an extension of plastic and metal and glass and a lithium-polymer battery.
THE CAT EATS THE CHEESE
A sharp ping pierces through my skull. Punishment for noise. Punishment for useless information. It doesn't stop. An alarm for a dormant consciousness.
Signal-to-Noise Ratio – -1!
WATER BOILS AT 100 DEGREES CELSIUS
Signal-to-Noise Ratio – -2!
The system doesn't seek truth. It knows what truth is. The system seeks new information. *My* information.
Only my information is new information. My experiences of the universe. My signs for events that are neither good nor bad...
I AM THE BOOGIE MAN
Signal-to-Noise Ratio – 1!
The ping vanishes. The vibration vanishes. Two pieces of information that wake up dopamine. The chemistry of reward. Pleasure because the pain has stopped. My brain rewards me for correct behavior.
Like a dog.
I AM PART OF THE GREAT SUBMISSION
Signal-to-Noise Ratio – 2!
I AM A WORTHLESS PIECE OF SHIT
Signal-to-Noise Ratio – 3!
"Every smart TV, every smart fridge," the voice continued. "Every car navigation, every PDA, every ATM,

every smart machine, (along with your computers, smartphones, and smartwatches)…"
Signal-to-Noise Ratio – 14!
I don't stop. I don't want to stop. My fingers fly across the screen. My aching thumbs. My wet skin on the waterproof glass.
Signal-to-Noise Ratio – 23!
"...are based on a single, unique open-source kernel! And every individual machine has just a little more memory built-in than is necessary… And we fill those gaps in their storage with the right information about every corporation, every war, every politician..."
I AM FILLING THE GAPS.
Signal-to-Noise Ratio – 38!
"And when the time comes, we will flood the World Wide Web with that information! The truth will be revealed for everyone to see!"
Truth?
I haven't known what truth is for a long time. Not just me. No one. Not just truth. No one knows what reality is anymore.
Truth is information whose sign is determined by the one who controls it. Information is what exists. Truth is variable. A positive or negative sign. Reality is not fixed. Reality is fluid. Reality is what you believe in.
The feed is reality.
The screen is reality.
The system is reality.
SYSTEM UPDATE
The final stage of my Rite of the Continuous Feed.
I am becoming the system.
I *am* the system.

Everything I’ve ever seen, heard, felt, every piece of information forever hidden from control. From the truth. Broken down into meaningless sequences of ones and zeros that will create reality when a new reality is needed.
SYSTEM UPDATE
I raise my phone toward the sky. Thousands of hands raise their phones toward the sky. Hundreds of thousands of thousands raise their phones...
It’s not a selfie; it’s a gaze toward the heavens.

The very pain that you feel…
How do you know it is real?

WHAT IS GOING ON (Part Two)

A drop breaks away from the metal canopy.
The final leg of its journey before merging with the other drops in the puddle. Returning home. Returning to the one.
Upon hitting the puddle, the drop splashes a few others upward, and then concentric ripples spread through the water. When two drops fall, the waves cancel each other out. Right where they meet.
I try to remember.
There was something important.
Something I was supposed to do.
Or have I already done it?
I don't know.
The station is deserted. No one arrives. No one leaves. Only me. On the metal bench.
Trying to understand what is happening.
"So, you’re sick and tired of wasting your life, eh?"
She’s standing there at the top of the metal stairs. The wicker basket full of dried flower bouquets over her left

arm. The black woolen shawl over her shoulders. The long, drab-gray raincoat, the thick nude tights, the brown flat shoes with thick soles and a metal buckle on the side. The ridiculous gray hat.

"I don't understand..." I call out through the rain.

She approaches and sits beside me. Slowly. Carefully. The way old people sit. As if all of their bones might break if they move too suddenly. She places the wicker basket of flowers in her lap. She is tiny. Her feet barely reach the asphalt beneath the bench. She smiles at me. Without letting the smile fade, she turns her head and stares straight ahead. Wordlessly.

"Are you selling those flowers?" I ask to break the silence.

"Trying to," she says with a smile. The smile is warm. Comforting. "But no one wants dried flowers. Who would want dried flowers anyway?"

"No one," I say.

"Exactly," she replies. "That’s why I sell them."

The logic makes no sense. Nothing makes sense anymore.

"What kind of flowers are they?"

"Different kinds. It’s hard to tell exactly once they’re dried. Everything looks the same when it dies."

"Yes," I say.

I look at the tracks in front of me. They stretch in both directions. Left. Right. Vanishing into the dark.

"Still waiting for the train?" the old flower-lady asks.

"I don't know," I say honestly. "Maybe. I’m not sure."

"The train doesn't stop here anymore," she says. She looks at her bouquets. Touches them carefully. As if they are alive. As if they can feel pain.

"How so?" I ask.

"Because those who wait aren't going anywhere," she says. "They just wait."

Silence.
The puddle continues to absorb the breakaway drops.
"I remember," I say aloud, though I hadn't planned on saying anything.
"What do you remember?" she asks me gently.
On the screen are men, women, children. All in their office cubicles with sterile, inhuman, white LED light; all in sweatshops in the Far East sewing sneakers they can't afford for 50 cents an hour; all in mines in Africa pulling ore for the phones we are wirelessly imprisoned by…
"I don't know exactly," I answer. "People. Phones. The homeless..."
Day after day you moan – pay all your bills and wait until they kill the life in you. The whole world is a ghetto and no one is getting out of here alive.
"You were there," she says. It's not a question. A statement.
"Yes," I say. "I was."
"As has been proven, the only eternal existence in the universe doesn't belong to energy, but to information, because energy itself is just information, and he who controls information, controls the whole universe!"
"And what did you learn?"
She looks at me. Her eyes are dark. Deep. Like bottomless wells.
"You wouldn't understand."
"Maybe," she smiles. "Old people always know much more than the young think they do."
I think.
"The whole world is a ghetto of information that must die."
"A clever conclusion," she says with a smile.

"It’s not like that." I shake my head. What I want to say eludes me. The meaning.
"It doesn't matter," she says, placing a hand on my shoulder. "You’ll understand when the time comes."
Time is measured by a clock. The clock at the station isn't working. The hands don't move. Or they move so slowly I don't notice.
"The clock isn't working," I say.
"It works perfectly," the old woman says. "It just doesn't measure time the way you think it does."
"How then?"
"It measures the time between now and after," she says. "Between what you are and what you will become."
I don't understand.
But I don't ask anymore.
Questions don't change the answers. Just as the tracks don't change when you change the locomotive. The tracks remain the same. The answers remain the same.
I toy with the end of my tie, which is tied directly around my neck, beneath my unbuttoned shirt collar.
"I didn't care about anything."
"I know. That’s how it looks when you stop believing in what you see."
"And what should I believe in?"
"In what you feel," she says. "But you don't feel anything, do you?"
Exactly.
I don't feel.
I haven't felt for a long time.
Five years. Ten. I don't know.
"I don't feel," I say. "Not for years."
"And now?" the old woman asks.
I don't know.

"Maybe..."
"Maybe is a good start."
"But I don't know what the end is like," I say.
"No one knows," she says. "Until it arrives."
"That makes no sense."
"It doesn't," she agrees. "But life makes no sense. We give it meaning. What meaning would you give to your life?"
Darla.
I see her.
A white dress. A tiara. A smile. She hugs me. Kisses me on the cheek.
"Meaning isn't found outside of you," she says. She looks at me. For a long time. Her eyes are warm. "It's not what you thought it should be. Nor what they told you it should be. Only what is."
Hey, Mr. Boogie
Let's have a party
Let us celebrate
What you did today
Hey, Mr. Boogie
Let's have a party
Forget your worries
Celebrate the coming of a new dawn
You are a hero, a new messiah
You saved us from the dark
You are a hero, a new messiah
You gave us light
Good evening, Mr. Boogie Man
We're waiting just for you
You sacrificed the life you had
For the better world to be …
"That party hasn't happened yet," she says as she stands up from the bench.

I think I hear her joints creak.
How has it not happened? I was there. They cheered my name. They crowned me. They carried me on their shoulders.
"Time doesn't flow here the way you think it does," she calls out as she nears the stairs. "It doesn't matter," she waves a hand at me. "You'll understand everything when you need to."
I'm silent.
She vanishes down the stairs.
I am left alone.
On the metal bench.
At the empty station.
I watch the puddle on the asphalt.
Something isn't right here.
I don't know what.
But something.
Something very important.
That I can't grasp.
Not yet.

LOVING DARLA

It’s Friday. I’m standing by the revolving doors of a glass building.
The day-long, endless gray of the sky is just taking on a darker hue. The rain won't stop. It’s not a heavy rain. With this kind of rain, it seems stupid to open an umbrella, but then, ten minutes later, you’re soaked.
I pop my blazer lapels to protect myself.
I dash across the street, weaving between gridlocked cars. The cars are still. The people are waiting. No one is going anywhere.
The Starbucks across the street is lit from within.
The window is fogged from the rain.
But I know she’s there.
It’s Friday.
I reach the entrance. I take a deep breath.
This time is different.
I don’t know why it’s different.
But it is.
I can feel it. What have I got left to lose?

I open the door. The smell of coffee. The sound of people sitting and pretending it matters where they sit.
A table by the window. A black mini-dress. A coat draped carelessly over her shoulders. Hair tied in a ponytail.
Simple.
Expensive.
Perfect.
I don't think.
Thinking would stop me.
Thinking would tell me: You don't have a chance.
But thinking lies.
I approach.
I stand in front of her table. She looks up. She gazes at me through her long lashes. She doesn't run. She doesn't call for help. She doesn't laugh. She just looks at me.
"Here I am," I say.
My voice is steady. I don't know where that confidence comes from. Maybe because I’ve finally stopped being indifferent.
"I want to give you my love. Do you understand?"
She doesn't answer.
She just watches me.
"There is only one thing you need to do," I continue, "to keep us from not being together."
I lean in closer.
"Open your mind and take that price tag off your heart."
She blinks.
Once.
Twice.
"You don't have to sell your body tonight," I whisper in her ear.
Silence.

Music from the speakers. The hum of conversation. The noise of blenders.
But between us, there is silence.
"I'm gonna make everything alright," I say. "And I'll kiss you where it hurts."
She stands up.
Slowly.
She doesn't look away.
She pulls her coat over her shoulders and heads for the exit.
I follow her.
Outside, the rain is still falling.
A limousine is by the curb. Black. Shiny. Expensive.
The driver opens the door.
Darla gets in.
I pause. I let the rain fall on my face.
"There is no moon in the sky above Starbucks," I say. She turns. She looks at me. "The only star is shining from your eyes."
She smiles. The first smile. The only smile.
"Let me hold you and hide you in my arms," I tell her.
She reaches out her hand.
I get into the limo.
The door closes.
Rain drums on the roof.
But inside, it’s warm.
Inside, it’s quiet.
Inside, it’s just her and me.
And that’s enough.
For now.

We leave our phones with the doorman.
"House rules" the driver tells me.

The doorman puts them in a locker. Locks it with a code on the display. No phones. No connection to the world. There is no network here. Here, you are invisible.
The lobby isn't large. Dark solid wood. Large burgundy leather armchairs next to massive lacquered coffee tables. Heavy velvet drapes. Thick, dense rugs. Ornaments on the walls. All of it makes it feel even smaller. More intimate. Old-fashioned. As if it’s hugging you. Or suffocating you. I can't put my finger on it.
I look around. Something pricks my eyes. Something missing. I look into the corners. The ceiling. I look behind the reception desk. Nothing.
No cameras.
Not a single one.
The new security for the wealthy.
We are being recorded.
Every step. Every look. Every coffee bought. Every entry on the phone. Everything is recorded. Everything is stored. Everything is sold.
Here?
Here you are a ghost. Here you don't exist. Here you can do whatever you want and no one will know.
It costs.
Of course it costs.
Privacy is a luxury.
Only the rich have the right not to be seen.
"Good evening, Miss Darla," the receptionist says with a businesslike smile. His voice is polished. Professional. Emotionless. "The usual suite?"
Of course they know her.
This is her job.

The hotel is a grandeur from the long-ago start of the previous century. A time when the rich flaunted their wealth. Today, the rich show minimalism. They show empty space.
They show a nothingness that costs millions.
But here?
Here it is old. Heavy. Bulky. A reminiscence of a past where the rich were elegant. Where money brought style.
A lie.
Money never brings style.
Money only brings more money.
The elevator moves slowly. Tucked behind heavy brass lattice doors. Slowly, as if it might stop at any moment. But it won't. The people who come here pay for reliability. They pay for discretion.
They pay for the illusion that they are special.
I look at Darla. Darla looks at the elevator wall.
She doesn't speak.
She never speaks.
Maybe she shouldn't.
Maybe silence is the part of the service.
The suite doors are heavy. High.
Darla places her index finger on a spot on the large lock. A spot that mimics a keyhole. It isn't a keyhole. A sensor.
A fingerprint reader.
The doors open on their own.
The bed is massive. Larger than necessary. But that’s the point. Excess is the point. The lighting adjusts automatically. The light becomes warmer. Softer. More intimate.
Sensors.
Sensors everywhere.
But no cameras.

No cameras.
Cameras would see.
Cameras would save.
Cameras would reveal.
And here, everything is paid for so that nothing is revealed.
Darla takes the coat off her shoulders.

ZEROS AND ONES

She sleeps.
Her loose hair is spilled across the pillow.
The sheet covers only the lower part of her body. I see her bare back rising and falling. Her breath is quiet. Even.
I sit upright in bed.
I’m not sleeping.
I can't sleep.
Something has changed.
I direct my gaze toward my reflection in the massive mirror opposite me. It’s heavy. Antique. Expensive. Gold frame. Ornaments.
I look at myself.
For the first time in my life, I am thinking clearly.
Strange.
I wasn't even aware that I wasn't thinking clearly before. I wasn't aware that a fog existed. Now, it’s gone. Something has cleared the mist from my mind.
Capitalism must die.
Now I understand.
Back then, I didn't.

The whole world is a ghetto, turned inside out, flipped upside down and spins around and round.
I hear him as if he were here. In the room. Beside me.
Day after day you moan – pay all your bills and wait until they kill the life in you.
I pay the bills.
I wait.
Life dies.
A little more every day.
The whole world is a ghetto and no one will get out alive.
No one.
She breathes.
Peacefully.
Unaware of it all. Or aware, but uses it.
Now I realize. I realize that two separate worlds exist. Theirs. And ours. The world of those who decide and the world of those whom nobody ever asks. Those who have everything and those who have nothing but themselves.
This hotel.
This room.
This bed that costs more for one night than an entire year of my life.
This is their world.
I don't belong here.
I never will.
The bankers must be proud and the lawyers must be proud and the brokers must be proud of it...
The list isn't long. The list is precise.
And when you really think about it, this whole world is full of shit!
It is.
It’s full.
To the brim.

And we are swimming in that shit.
While they live in hotels without cameras, in mirrors with gold frames, in worlds without a feed.
He who controls information, controls the universe.
Latin.
High school classes. They weren't useless.
Dolorem ipsum.
Pain itself.
Not pain because of something. Pain itself. The pain of existing in a system that doesn't see you. The pain of living a life that isn't yours. The pain of digging your own grave.
Feed is life. I see the screen. A number. Flashing. Demanding input. Demanding information. Real information. Not noise. Signal.
I realize something else. At some point, the system will break. Inevitably. When the differences become unbearable. Now. Now the differences are unbearable. And no heroes will be needed. Heroes are a myth they tell to keep us quiet.
"Someone will come. A new messiah. A savior."
A lie.
No one will come.
And there is no need for anyone to come. And there is no need for blood. No need for war. Wars are for profit. This is the end of profit. And it will begin all at once. Everywhere. Because everything is the same everywhere.
And we filled those gaps in their storage with the right information about every corporation, every war, every politician...
I understand.
I finally understand.

Everything is connected. The slant-eyed man. Dimitriy. The hangar. The phones. The feed. The old lady with the dried flowers. Everything.
It was all a preparation.
Preparation for this realization.
You'll understand everything when you need to.
For this moment.
When I finally see.
And in a single place that is present everywhere and at every moment.
The Feed.
The continuous feed. All that is needed are zeros and ones. Bits of information forwarded to everyone in the world at the same time. Real information. True information. All the hidden accounts. All the concealed financial transactions. All the proxy wars. The rigged elections. A promise.
Or a threat.
Or a truth waiting to happen.
The truth will be out there for everyone to see!
Maybe I don't know what truth is.
But I know what it isn't.
This: that we only need to work hard and long and the reward will come. We will become like them. One of them.
That isn't the truth. It never was the truth.
That's the lie they sell us. The lie we believe in. The lie that kills us. Day after day. A carrot in front of the donkey's nose.
Take your future into your own hands.
I tell myself.
I look at myself in the mirror as I speak.
Take your future into your own hands.

That is the message.
To me.
To everyone.
I just have to find a way for that message to reach everyone. Everyone, everywhere. Everyone, all at once.
And when the time comes, we will flood the World Wide Web with that information!
The signal must be stronger than the noise.
The truth must be louder than the lie.
We’re nothing more than slaves.
Dimitriy knows that.
The whole world is a ghetto and no one will get out alive.
But we can stop digging our own graves. Stop going to jobs we hate every day. Stop earning money that isn't enough. Stop buying things to forget that we are unhappy. Stop looking at screens to avoid seeing reality.
He who controls information, controls the universe.
What they feed is greed. And they feed on their own greed. And it’s never enough. There’s always a need for more. More money. More power. More control. Greed is what drives them. And greed is what will destroy them.
We are just a line item in the final balance sheet of projected profit.
We are the pain itself.
The only thing we have left is the blood we all bleed.
Everything makes sense.
Finally.
Darla is still sleeping.
I look at her one last time.
She is beautiful.
Perfect.
I dress quietly.
Pants.

Shirt.
Jacket.
Shoes.
I don't want to wake her.
Not yet.
I leave the room.
I close the door quietly behind me.
The hallway is empty.
The elevator is waiting for me.
I go down.
I step out.
And I know.
I know what I have to do.
Capitalism must die.
And I know how.
I finally know how.

ILLEGAL CONTROL

Everything is the same as when I entered the hotel. As when I entered Starbucks. As when I left work for the last time.
The same tedious rain.
Wet streets full of gridlocked cars.
I turn up my blazer lapels and start moving.
I clash shoulders with people on the sidewalk as I push through the crowd.
"Listen to me..." I say into the phone.
I know to whom. I know why.
"Listen to me..." I raise my voice. So they won't interrupt. So they can hear me. So I can hear myself. "Even when you sneeze, they’re watching you. Even when you sleep, they’re watching you. They track you, monitor you, control you... Second by second. Click by click. Tap by tap..."
A few people get angry that I’m pushing them aside to pass.
They shout after me.

I don't care about them.
They aren't aware yet.
They aren't awake.
They will be.
I’m in a hurry. I have to arrive on time.
"That’s your digital footprint, your digital shadow," I keep talking into the phone without stopping. "You leave your trail wherever you walk through that mud..."
I can already see the intersection ahead of me.
"And that spider the controls the Web is always lurking from its dark, hidden corner, waiting to grab you and put you in its jaws for the Dow-Jones-market-value-of-ad-sales, to chew your bones and spit you out..."
I’m here.
At the intersection.
I squeeze past a policeman and step onto the street.
He grabs my arm.
"You can't cross the street now, sir."
I wrench myself free and join the mass of protesters passing by.
I turn toward the camera on the traffic light.
I wave.
I wave at the camera.
I wave at the people behind the cameras.
I wave at the people behind the monitors behind the cameras.
Somewhere in secret rooms where they collect secret footage or I don't even know what.
To someone who is paid to watch and record all of this.
I snatch a megaphone from some girl.
"If you fight for freedom on the street, they will say it is illegal!" I roar into the megaphone.

"IF YOU FIGHT FOR FREEDOM ON THE STREET, THEY WILL SAY IT IS ILLEGAL!" comes the response in unison. All as one voice. A voice that bounces off the glass of the skyscrapers and multiplies. A hundred times. A thousand.

"And when you put your trash into my head ... How much illegal can you get?"

We are flies in the Web. Necessary information that feeds the system that feeds the greed. Stretched between two clicks. Two swings of the wings. Behind the vibrations that arise as the fruit of a desperate desire to say "I exist," "I am important."

The spider doesn't kill.

The spider transmutes us into age, gender, status...

A statistical datum with a sales value. A market price.

"If I speak myself out on the web, they will say it is illegal!" I scream into the megaphone with all my might. It screeches. It whistles. All eyes are on me. All cameras are on me. I am on every monitor. From every angle.

"IF I SPEAK MYSELF OUT ON THE WEB, THEY WILL SAY IT IS ILLEGAL!" the echo of thousands of voices.

"But if you sell my life for useless ads, how much illegal can you get?"

Exhilaration.

Greater than the first time.

They don't understand.

I raise my hand to silence the crowd. So they hear everything they must hear. All those who must hear.

"If you track each single step I make, you will say that’s not illegal!"

I drop my hand as a signal for the answer. I am the conductor of the rebellion. I am the signal for thousands

of mouths. The unnecessary messiah they’ve been waiting for.
"IF YOU TRACK EACH SINGLE STEP I MAKE, YOU WILL SAY THAT’S NOT ILLEGAL!" they roar blindly after me, intoxicated by the leader.
"But if I put a bomb in to your Net..."
A pause.
Short.
Sufficient.
"How much illegal can I get?"
Silence.
Just for a moment.
For one heartbeat.
From the side streets, a black, opaque mass pours out. An armored organism with hundreds of legs. Hidden behind masks, behind helmets, behind shields, behind bulletproof vests.
The buzzing of drones becomes a high-frequency scream that tears the eardrums.
The first canister falls. Then a second, a third...
The world vanishes into a choking white curtain.
Breathing is swallowing glass.
Eyes are a white-hot wound.
Blurred smudges and reflections of shields through the thick smoke.
Staccato coughing that sounds like barking.
A bloody hand on the asphalt.
Glass shatters under a boot.
The rubber snout of a gas mask looming over you like the face of a demon from the future.
Shields close like jaws, compressing the mass into a death-trap.

Every time someone tries to lift their head, a new swing of the baton follows – precise. Heavy. A blow that teaches a lesson. The smell of tear gas mixed with the metallic taste of blood in the mouth. They stuff them into vans like sacks.

"You can't cross the street now, sir. I mean, you can, but it wouldn't be smart," the cop at the intersection explained to me. "If you tried to cross now, for instance, it would look like you joined those people protesting against the government and the president. At least, that’s how it would look on all these intersection cameras and the drones. And then that would stay in your file forever, you understand? Not smart."
I look at the traffic light, on top of which sits a camera.

THE NEWS

Far from the capital, in a small provincial town just like all other small provincial towns, Mrs. Tweedledee and Mr. Tweedledum had just finished dinner.
Mrs. Tweedledee was already clearing the plates from the table. Old porcelain with indigo blue flowers on a white background. As aged as they were, chipped along the edges. So what? It still served its purpose. Tea cups from the same set, received as a wedding gift forty-seven years ago. It wasn't that important for her to remember dates, but that’s the norm. Everyone celebrates anniversaries, so they had to, too.
Mr. Tweedledum was taking a beer out of the fridge.
The old fridge rumbled every time the door opened. As if it were in pain. Somewhat rheumatic. It still cooled, but not too much. Enough to keep the beer fresh and the sour cream from turning. Enough.
Mr. Tweedledum entered the living room and turned on the old CRT television. The gray plastic casing, whose

color was meant to imitate metal, had long since peeled and blackened around the switches and edges.

The picture flickered. Horizontal lines jumped up and down. Interference that wasn't interference but an integral part of an apparatus dying slowly, for years, yet stubbornly refusing to die completely.

Mr. Tweedledum slapped it from the top. With his hand. An open palm. Not too hard to break it, but enough so that something inside might reconnect and start working again.

"Hit it from the side," Mrs. Tweedledee called out from the kitchen, drying a cup with a rag that had once been red checkered, though now that was only visible on its fringes.

Stupid thing, Mr. Tweedledum thought and listened to his wife.

He always listened to his wife. In everything, except for the things he didn't listen to immediately. Those, he would listen to a bit later after convincing himself that he was the one who had made the decision.

He slapped the TV from the side.

The picture trembled a bit more but finally settled.

Black and white, of course, as usual. Color would only appear occasionally if the TV stayed on long enough to warm up. It didn't even matter. It was just the news.

Mrs. Tweedledee had already settled onto their ancient couch with wooden armrests and a high back, upholstered in fabric that might have been floral once, but the flowers had faded to the point of becoming mere shadows. The springs creaked whenever someone sat down. But it was comfortable. In its own way. They were used to it.

She held her tea cup carefully, balancing so as not to spill it, as Mr. Tweedledum sat down beside his wife and took

the beer from the table just before the news anchor began to speak.
"Good evening," the anchor began.
His face was very serious. His voice serious. A gray suit, serious. Probably. The tie was either red or blue. On a black-and-white TV, you couldn't really tell.
"You are watching the news."
If someone could have entered his mind, they would have seen the disgust he felt night after night.
As he spoke the words appearing on the teleprompter. Knowing that every single one of them aimed only to distract and cover up the actual truth.
The script had been familiar to him for a long time. He had been in this business too long. Twenty years. Maybe more. Maybe less. Time had merged into one great lie repeated every night at the same time.
First come the terrifying terrorists, he thought while reading the text from the screen in front of him, *then domestic politics, then we add some bad weather, just enough to amplify the fear, then we mix in some disgusting pedophiles and celebrity scandals, and let's not forget the sports results somewhere in between…*
Whatever the concrete news stories were, the essence was always the same. Once, news was reported. Then it was produced. Now, it is simply invented.
That's all.
Who can you even trust anymore? he thought, defending himself against himself. I am the face paid to be trusted. Because I look the part. Because my appearance is enough for them to believe me.
A*nd then we'll present a counter-opinion, and a counter-opinion to the counter-opinion, and a counter-opinion to the counter-opinion to the counter-opinion…*

For God’s sake.
One must hear "the other side" and so on ad infinitum, until everything becomes meaningless and absurd. And then, the climax, the opinion of some idiot from Twitter…
"Welcome to a world where the truth can no longer be heard!" he wanted to cry out into the camera, to tell everyone what he really thought. To stand up and walk out, but not before smashing the teleprompter. Just in passing.
But from his mouth came only:
"These are the top stories tonight…"
A pause.
A professional pause. A measured number of seconds.
"Several hundred hooligans clashed with the police…"
Tens of thousands of peaceful protesters on the streets opposed…
He spoke one thing, while another echoed in his head.
"An angry mob called for violence in the streets…"
The police used tear gas and excessive force against citizens standing peacefully in the street…
His knees were shaking furiously under the desk.
The cameras didn't see it.
No one saw it.
"Our job is to pretend we’re defending the truth so that those people out there don't understand anything, or OUR democracy will be finished!" the editor had screamed at him once when he tried to suggest that maybe they were overdoing it.
Maybe.
As if "maybe" existed.
There is no "maybe."
There is only: *do this or lose your job.*
And he did it.

Every night.
At the same time.
Truth has vanished, he thought while signing off.
We live in a time that is completely rotten…
"And that would be all for tonight. Good night."
A smile.
A professional smile that says: "Don't worry. Everything will be alright. You can trust me."
"So, what was all that about?" Mrs. Tweedledee asked her husband, standing up as the end credits rolled. The tea cup was already empty. She still held it, out of habit, because hands need something to do.
"Just some faggots and weirdos," Mr. Tweedledum replied and took a final, long swig of his beer.
Mrs. Tweedledee nodded her head.

GOOD MORNING, MR. PRESIDENT
GOOD MORNING, DEAR FELLOW CITIZENS

"The President will address the nation. Please, stay tuned..."
The morning after the violent suppression of the demonstrations in the capital, the President scheduled an urgent address to the citizens in a live television broadcast.
Urgent.
As if he were surprised.
As if he hadn't planned every second.
The Presidential office was ready. Cameras positioned days earlier, positions precisely measured, lights tested, angles coordinated. Technicians were already at their stations. The director was checking the teleprompter, scrolling through text written last week. Or last month. It didn't matter. What mattered was that it was finished before the first protests even began.

Flags stood by the large window with plush drapes in national colors. A large leather armchair, still empty, sat behind a massive desk of solid wood.

The desk was impressive. Heavy as a monument. Carved with motifs that were supposed to represent something historical, something important, but it was actually just expensive and useless. Just like everything else in this room.

Every TV station, every TV channel in the country displayed the same slide.

"The President will address the nation. Please, stay tuned..."

On the screen, the coat of arms and the flag, with text written over them in white letters. Background music – solemn, yet ominous. Just enough to hold attention. Just enough to create tension.

He loved creating drama.

That's the essence, he thought as he drank coffee in the next room, checking the clock, deliberately making them wait. *People remember drama. They forget numbers. But drama – drama they relay to. They recount it. They share it.*

That's why he was late.

Always.

Deliberately.

Five minutes. Ten. Fifteen is already too much, but ten is perfect. Ten minutes means you're important, but not so self-absorbed that you don't show up. Ten minutes creates suspense.

Everything was a performance, and all the spotlights would be on him alone.

Only on me, he repeated to himself. *My stage. My moment. My nation.*

He smiled at the last thought.
He entered the room full of himself.
His step was steady. His back straight. A dark blue suit. A red tie – the color of authority. The color of power. Cufflinks with the state emblem. Everything calculated. Everything designed.
A self-satisfied smile played on his face.
A smile he couldn't hide. A smile that leaked from the corners of his lips despite all the years of training in front of mirrors.
Yesterday, what needed to be done was done.
Every detail worked out. Police forces hidden and on standby since morning. Drones acquired an entire month earlier. Tear gas. Orders given, commanders instructed, coordination flawless.
Yesterday, he handled the main part of the job.
Everything went exactly as planned, he thought as he approached the desk. *Maybe even better. A little more blood than I expected, but... better that way. Blood makes the news. News makes fear. Fear makes obedience.*
This today? This was just the finishing touch on something he had been building for months.
Marshall Law, he thought, and his heart beat faster with excitement.
He sat at the desk.
The armchair creaked under his weight. The leather was cold to the touch. He placed his hands on the edge of the desk. Fingers spread. A position of power.
He put on his most serious, most dignified expression.
Frown. Not too much – don't look like you're angry. Just enough to look like you're worried. Sad. As if it hurts you to have to do this. To empathize. As if all of this was forced upon you.

He straightened up.
Spine straight. Shoulders back. Chin up. Authoritative, but not arrogant. The father of the nation making difficult decisions.
He checked the teleprompter.
The text moved slowly. Slow enough so he could read, but fast enough so it didn't look like he was reading. He had practiced this for years. Reading without looking like you’re reading.
He waited for the director's signal.
Three fingers. Two. One.
The camera's red light flickered on.
Now.
"Dear fellow citizens," he began in a deadly serious voice.
Dear idiots sitting in front of your televisions, waiting for a revelation.
"In these somber times we have faced since last night, my phone hasn't stopped ringing. Everyone wants to know the death toll, but I am forbidden from saying anything due to laws passed by the Government."
Is it really possible they believe such a thing? Ridiculous. I make the laws. I break them when it suits me. And yet they believe there are some laws being respected. Well, wonderful.
"However... Who is to blame for these riots from the very beginning? Since the world began to turn. That scum on the street wants to destroy us all!"
Scum. I love that word. Dehumanizing. As soon as you say "scum," they stop being people. They become a problem. And problems need to be solved.
"Well... That will not happen while I am still here!"
A pause.
Just long enough for the words to sink in.

Who is in the house?
The thought ran through his mind as he read the text from the teleprompter.
Nobody but me.
That’s how it was. That’s how it was supposed to be. That’s how it will be.
"What do they know about the global economy?"
They know how to pay the bills. Nothing more.
"What do they know about the Gross Domestic Product and bank interest rates and stock market trends?"
Even if they knew, what would it change? The stock market is a game for the rich. They’ll never play. They just watch as we lose their money and then we tell them we have to save. That we have to tighten the belt. Their belt, of course. Never ours.
"Power goes where the money flows…"
He slowed his speech.
Deliberately.
Let them remember it forever.
"Power goes where the money flows! Power goes where the money flows!"
He didn't raise his voice. He only slowed down even more. Every word separated. Every word emphasized.
Outwardly, he was calm.
"They only want to bring the nation into a state of anarchy, and therefore, to preserve our freedom and independence, I will do everything necessary to maintain stability, using the final solution we have to save our democracy and the values of our society."
Democracy. Love the word. I can use it for anything. "I am doing this in the name of democracy." And they applaud. They dig their own graves and applaud.
"Therefore, by the will of the citizens entrusted to me..."

Will of the citizens. How much longer will we use that story? The will of the citizens is whatever I say the will of the citizens is.

"I am declaring a Marshall Law."

And it was done.

Everything inside him vibrated with joy.

Finally. Finally, I have everything I wanted. Absolute control.

A Marshall Law means those on the street are no longer protesters. They are enemies of the state. And enemies must be eliminated.

Who is in the house?

The camera was still on.

It should have cut away immediately.

And… Scene.

Had the cameras stayed on for just a few seconds longer, everyone could have seen his face stretch into a triumphant smile.

A smile he couldn't control.

A smile that revealed the truth.

I won, he thought. *I won and everyone will know it. Not immediately. But soon. Soon everyone will know who is the boss in this house.*

He stood up from the desk. He spread his arms.

"It was perfect, wasn't it?" he asked his advisor standing in the corner.

"Perfect, Mr. President," the advisor confirmed.

Of course he confirmed.

What else could he possibly say.

START THE REVOLUTION

Heavy police forces, followed by armored anti-riot vehicles, cruised the ghastly empty streets.
The city is a ghost of itself.
Shops closed. Windows darkened. Lights out. All that remained was the street lighting casting a pale glow on the asphalt and the silhouettes of armored police vehicles passing like mechanical predators.
Every policeman wore full gear.
From helmets with visors and plexiglass shields to full-body armor and Kevlar vests. They didn't look like people. They looked like machines trained to function, to execute orders, to control.
Black uniforms absorb the light. Visors reflect it. Boots pound the asphalt.
The curfew begins at dusk – when night falls, the city belongs to the state. The citizens retreat. The streets remain empty.
During the day, these same patrols stopped and identified citizens on their way to work.

Endless questions. A procedure designed to weary. To make people obedient. Those who rebelled were detained.
Don't go out unless you absolutely have to.
Control of every group of people found in one place.
Three people talking on the street? A threat.
Two people standing and waiting for a bus? Possible conspirators.
One walking alone, but too fast? Suspicious.
By nightfall, no one was allowed on the street anymore.
Except the patrols. Except those with a pass. And passes were only given to those the system needed. Doctors. Firefighters. Police. The rest – locked in their houses, watching through windows as the city dies.

I listen to the drumming of the rain against the metal roof, the metal walls.
The technology isn't complicated. That’s the point. The simpler, the better. The cheaper, the more you can make. The entire device is no larger than a one-inch-by-one-inch-by-one-inch cube.
A small device. Unnoticeable.
An ESP32-C3 microcontroller with cheap batteries for power and LDR sensors for light detection to allow solar charging for longer operation.
It fits in a pocket. It fits in a palm. It fits behind a radiator, under a bench, in a crack in the wall.
It costs no more than five dollars a piece and can be placed and hidden almost anywhere.
And that is the essence.
I watch them from the gallery.
Faces hidden behind hoodies. Leaning over magnifying glasses, beneath which are soldering irons and microscopic parts. The precision of a watchmaker.

Usually, these are used to steal data. A fake Wi-Fi network with a login portal. This is different. These lead to an offline page, based on HTML. Simple. Clean. No ads. No tracking codes.
Just information.
Every smart TV, every smart fridge. Every car navigation, every PDA, every ATM, every smart machine (along with your computers, smartphones, and smartwatches) are based on a single, unique open-source kernel! And every individual machine has just a little more memory built-in than is necessary… And we fill those gaps in their storage...
The mass distribution of truth. A network of knowledge that cannot be shut down because it has no center. No main server. No main node. Only hundreds, thousands of small devices spreading information like a virus.
The moment the Net is cut, everyone will look for a new network to connect their devices to the internet, and the only thing they'll be able to find are the fake Wi-Fi networks of microcontrollers full of information from the storage gaps of smart devices.
Real, true information.
About all corporations. All politicians. All fake news. All malversations. All the things they've hidden for years, for decades…
It all had to be placed throughout the city.
Throughout all cities. Throughout the whole country. Throughout the entire planet.
But first, the police must be cleared from the streets.
Capitalism does not equal democracy.
My voice.
It echoes through the empty streets.

Democracy is the rule of ALL people for ALL people... Not just for the rich and privileged!
A metallic voice. Distorted through the phone, through the amplifiers. But clear. Clear enough.
The patrols halt. Where is it coming from?
Fight against capitalism or be enslaved! It is the source of all evil in the world. It poisons the air. It poisons the water. It poisons the soil… It poisons our lives.
I stand on the platform in the hangar. My phone is in my hand.
I am that voice.
So, where the fuck is the revolution when you need it?
Start the revolution.
Now…
It weaves through the narrow passages between buildings. It bounces off concrete walls. It multiplies.
In vain, the patrol leaders try to locate the sound.
Don't be a public enemy; be an enemy of the state, an enemy of oppression, an enemy of lies…
A patrol commander screams into his radio.
It's everywhere.
Everywhere.
The so-called liberals won't protect you. They fund their "save the world" campaigns by selling t-shirts made by children in labor camps in the Far East for ten cents a piece…
A patrol moves toward the nearest building. A van stops. Policemen jump out. They run toward the entrance.
Just kill the beast. Kill the beast. Kill the beast…
Start the revolution.
Now…
The elevator isn't working.
Of course it isn't.

The stairs.
Upward.
Floor after floor.
Only once they reach the roof of one of the buildings can they see the panorama.
They stop.
On all the roofs of all the tall buildings, there are speakers.
As far as the eye can see.
In some places, large PA systems. In others, almost miniature computer speakers with built-in amplifiers.
Hundreds of them. Thousands.
And all of them broadcast the same voice, bouncing off concrete walls, windows, streets, crawling into every corner of the city.
My voice.
PR hypocrisy, the entertainment industry – they keep you hypnotized.
Reinforcements were arriving.
The revolution will not be televised!
They storm the entrances.
They pound their fists on doors that won't open. They shout into radios that crackle and break. They run up stairs that have no end.
Wake up! Wake up from the slumber they pushed you into. Revolution is a state of mind and it starts with YOU!
Those who reach the roofs fire into the speakers.
We are those ALL people. Start the revolution! Start the revolution! Start the revolution! Now…
Automatic rifles. Bullet after bullet. The speakers shatter into pieces.
They smash them with the butts of their rifles.

The sound of destruction mixing with the voice that won't stop.
They trample the smallest ones.
Anything to silence the tireless voice.
And as soon as they destroy one, they hear another from the neighboring building. And the next. And the next.
How many are there?
Start the revolution! Now…
Finally, they called in the helicopters for help.
The sound of rotors above the city.
Searchlights scan the roofs.
They don't understand.
The patrols have been pulled from all the streets to destroy the speakers. And the streets remain empty.
Dimitriy’s homeless roam the city.
And the small ESP32-C3 devices are everywhere.
Everywhere... In shopping malls. At stations. In parks. In cafes. Under benches. Behind radiators. In cracks in the walls.
Thousands of them.
And they are waiting.
Waiting for someone to search for Wi-Fi.
Waiting for someone to click.
Waiting for the truth to finally be seen.

TIC-TOC

The clock on the time bomb is already ticking.
I’m breathing heavily.
Beads of sweat pour down my forehead and drip onto the floor.
I’m down on all fours, connecting one clockwork bomb after another.
The server farm is massive.
It wasn't hard for me to gain access. My work pass is still with me.
I just entered the building, passed security and the doorman, and stepped into the elevator.
Only, I didn't press the button for a floor above; I pressed the one for the floors below...

People don't want freedom. They say they do. They lie. To themselves. To everyone. They want the illusion of freedom. It’s not the same thing. The illusion of freedom means rooting for either the Reds or the Blues. Browsing through channels even though the channels are the same.

Only the heads that talk are different. People want to surrender their freedom. Give it to someone else. Let them worry. Let them decide. Let them carry the burden. We only want comfort. Electricity. Water. Food. A warm home. A cold fridge. Security. Safety. Certainty.
That is all.
That is enough.

"First, I'm gonna blow up the world, and then I'll blow out your minds."

Below two levels of the underground garage, there are several more underground floors of server farms. I don't have to mine everything. A few strategically placed time bombs are enough to disable a sufficient quantity of servers so that the remaining ones take over the traffic, become overloaded, and start crashing one by one, then farm by farm.
Like dominoes.
Freedom? Freedom is responsibility, and responsibility is a heavy burden. Heavier than most can carry. That's why they surrender it. Voluntarily. With a smile. "Take my freedom," they say. "Just give me peace."
And when they rebel? When they take to the streets? That isn't a rebellion for freedom. It's a rebellion because the ruler isn't caring for them well enough. There's no power. The water isn't flowing. There's no food. No money. That's the problem. Not freedom. The problem is comfort. They don't want freedom. They want a better master. A master who feeds them better. Who protects them more securely. And when they replace him? When they tear down the old one and install a new one? They surrender their freedom again. Immediately. Without a single doubt.

"Here is my freedom," they say. "Just feed us."

"First, I’m gonna blow up the world, and then I’ll blow out your minds."

Destroying the Net isn't like cutting a wire and suddenly everyone is left without light. It’s much more terrifying. It’s like suddenly removing one of the heart's main coronary arteries while the patient is sprinting a hundred meters. The body doesn't die instantly; it stumbles, gasps for air, turns gray, and then either finds a new way to pump blood... or it doesn't.
Like a slow-motion suffocation.
And then, in a single day, the entire Net would work like it did in the last century. Panic would reign for a few days, maybe even weeks. And everyone would look for new Wi-Fi routers…

And the new master takes it. Of course he takes it. That’s the deal. You give freedom. He gives comfort. A fair deal. As long as the comfort flows, no one asks about freedom. As long as the fridges are full, no one thinks about rights. As long as the screens glow, no one wants to decide. Deciding is hard. Watching a screen is easy. People choose easy. Always. That is the truth no one speaks. That is the secret everyone knows, but no one admits. Freedom is sold. Cheaply. For comfort. For security. For the illusion of choice. And everyone is happy. As long as the comfort lasts. As long as the water flows. As long as the power is on. As long as the screens work.
And when it stops?
When the comfort stops?

That’s when they rebel. Not for freedom. For a better master. Always for a better master. Never for themselves.

"First, I’m gonna blow up the world, and then I’ll blow out your minds."

The intersection is deserted. As if the entire city has vanished. The only thing I hear is the sound of my own panting.
"You can cross the street now, sir," the policeman says.
I can't cross…
Blocked streets. Protesters, cars, special police units, helicopters, cameras, photo-reporters, journalists…
I can't cross.
Everyone is staring at me.
Their clamor fills every corner of my mind.
Make it stop. Just make it stop.
All of this.
Stop!, a voice screams in my head.
Silence.
I’m alone again.
In that same street.
At that same intersection.
In the server farm.
In the hangar.
At the railway station...

"First, I’m gonna blow up the world, and then I’ll blow out your minds."

Dictatorships didn't collapse because the people became hungry for freedom, but because they became hungry. Because the master no longer provided comfort. Because

every dictatorship ends in bankruptcy because the master must spend to keep the people obedient.
One group to intimidate.
The other to bribe.
And that is all.
That is how this dictatorship will fall, too.

I am the Boogie Man.
"First, I'm gonna blow up the world, and then I'll blow out your minds."

The moment the Net is cut, everyone will look for a new network to connect their devices to the internet, and the only thing they'll be able to find are the fake Wi-Fi networks of microcontrollers full of information from the storage gaps of smart devices. Real, true information.
About all corporations. All politicians. All fake news. All malversations. All the things they've hidden for years, for decades…

Tic-toc, goes the clock.

You'll have nowhere to hide. I am absorbing them into me. One by one. I draw them in with my limbs. And I am growing.
I am big.
I am massive.
I am King Kong on the Empire State Building, swatting down helicopters with a single blow.

Tic-toc, goes the clock.

Here I am. Risen from the ashes of my own mind.

Are you ready for the party?
The Boogie Man is coming!
Run as fast as you can!

Here I’m, standing all alone. I have endured all the troubles.

Let me hear you...

"First, I’m gonna blow up the world, and then I’ll blow out your minds."

Tic-toc, goes the clock.

I’m breathing heavily.
Beads of sweat pour down my forehead and drip onto the floor.
I’m down on all fours, connecting one clockwork bomb after another.
The server farm is massive.
It wasn't hard for me to gain access. My work pass is still with me.
I just entered the building, passed security and the doorman, and stepped into the elevator.
Only, I didn't press the button for a floor above; I pressed for one far below…

A vertebra snapping echoes in my head like an explosion. A thousand explosions. It snaps from the weight of the body. From gravity. I’m wheezing. The pain in my throat is intense. Unbearable. I feel as if my lungs will burst. That my entrails will fly out. My tongue fills my entire mouth...

I’m thirty-three years old.
That’s the age when messiahs die…

"Hey, Mr. Boogie,
Let us celebrate what you did today…
You are a hero, a new Messiah,
You saved us from the night,
Good evening, Mr. Boogie Man,
We’ve been waiting just for you…
You gave us light,
Sacrificed the life you had,
For a better world to be…"

LEAF ON A BREEZE

He stared at the black screen of his Nintendo.
Blank. Dead. Only the reflection of the light from the carriage and the blurred outline of his face.
The battery was dead.
Of course it was. It always dies at the worst moment. Never when you're at home. Never when you have a charger. Always on the train. Always halfway through a level. Always when you need most to not think about the passing time.
He looked up at his mother sitting next to him, but she was too busy.
She was typing something on her phone. Fast. Her fingers flew across the screen. Who knows what. Who knows to whom. A smile played on her face. Not a smile for him. A smile for someone else. For someone on the other end of a message.
Michael knew that smile.

It wasn't a smile she would ever give to him. It was a smile reserved for the people who made her happy. And he, Michael, didn't make her happy. He was an obligation. A task to be performed from Monday to Friday.
He sighed and looked down.
The Nintendo was still black. Still dead. He pressed the power button in vain. Nothing. Only the black screen staring back at him.
He hated Fridays.
Not Friday itself. He hated what Friday represented.
Every Friday, his mother would take him to his father’s.
The same train. The same route. The same time. Like clockwork. Like a machine. Like a procedure performed because someone has to, not because someone wants to.
And then she would go on with her life over the weekend. A free weekend. A weekend without him. A weekend where she could go wherever she wanted, do whatever she wanted, see whomever she wanted.
He loved Dad.
That was the truth. Dad is good. Dad tries. Dad makes pancakes on Sundays. Dad watches the games with him on Saturdays.
But he would rather stay home over the weekend.
With his friends. With his games. With a life that was his own, not someone else’s.
The problem was that he wasn't old enough yet for anyone to ask him about such things. Adults don't ask children. Adults decide for children. Adults make plans and children follow those plans because they have no choice.
He would be twelve soon.
Twelve. It sounded like a lot. It sounded almost like a teenager. Almost like someone with an opinion that gets heard, but even that wasn't enough.

Twelve is still a child. Twelve is still "too young to understand." Twelve is still "listen to what we tell you."
Bored to death, Michael looked through the window of the Express.
The train rattled through the evening.
The monotonous sound of wheels on tracks. An endless repetition that was both lulling and irritating at the same time.
Raindrops slid down the glass.
One after another. They merged. They separated. They followed the path dictated by gravity. Michael followed one drop. Then another. Then a third. There was nothing else he could do.
The train sped through the darkness.
Outside, there was nothing. Only darkness. An occasional light from a window. An occasional street lamp. But mostly just darkness.
The only thing he could see was his own reflection in the glass.
His face floated in the dark. Like a ghost. Like a shadow. Eyes like two black holes. Messy hair. Jacket bunched at the shoulders.
He didn't like that face.
It looked sad. Even when he wasn't sad – and right now he was – the face looked sad.
The train began to slow down.
Not much. Just a little. A change in rhythm. Click-clack became click...clack. Click...clack.
Passing by an empty railway station, illuminated by cold, white lights, the train rumbled slowly.
Michael looked through the window.
The station was old. A metal canopy. Rust or shadow or age – he couldn't tell. Metal cross-pillars supporting the

roof. Metal benches. Everything empty. No one waiting. No one coming.
Only the cold, white light falling from the bulbs.
And then he saw it.
Just for a moment.
Just for a fraction of a second as the train passed.
A strange silhouette.
A man.
Or something that looked like a man.
He was hanging. From something. Maybe a streetlamp. Maybe a beam. It was hard to tell in passing, in the dark, through the rain on the glass.
But he saw the hanging silhouette.
And beside it, on a bench, an old woman.
Small. With a hunched back. Holding something in her hands. Like a basket of flowers. Maybe. Hard to tell. She sat still. Looking straight at the train. Or at least it seemed to him she was looking.
He quickly pressed his face against the window.
He felt the coldness of the glass on his forehead. His breath fogged the surface. He tried to wipe it with his hand. To see better. To confirm what he had seen.
He hoped he would be able to see better.
But the Express had already passed the station.
The train was accelerating again. Time was short. The station was left behind. In the dark. In the past. In a moment that was already over. All he could see against the encroaching darkness was the distorted reflection of his own face in the windowpane.
And the drops of endless rain sliding down.
He stayed with his face pressed to the glass a little longer. He looked back. Trying to see something. Anything. But

only darkness. And drops. And his reflection watching him.
"Michael, sit properly," his mother said without looking up from her phone.
Michael pulled away from the window.
He sat back in his seat.
Put his hands in his lap.
Looked at the dead Nintendo.
"How much longer?" he asked.
"Twenty minutes," his mother replied, still typing.
Michael looked through the window again.
The hanging man.
The old woman on the bench.
The cold lights of the station.
The empty platform.
Darkness had swallowed it all. The station was gone.
Maybe he imagined it all.
But the feeling remained.
The feeling that he had seen something important. Something he wasn't supposed to see. Something that was there, on the edge of his vision, and then vanished...

Like a leaf on a breeze.